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AUTHOR Keough, Colleen M.
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ABSTRACT

The most appropriate vehicle for examining the role of language in producing sex role stereotypes and sexism is Kenneth Burke's concept of the terministic screen, a definition of reality that directs the attention of the audience along a certain line of thought. Thus, once a linguistic term is accepted as reflecting reality, the term influences the selection and deflection of future observations. Burke's theory of dialectics provides a corollary to this discussion, treating ideas and action as paired or polar terms that can be viewed as being discontinuous, separated by different interpretations of a sitatuion. Transcendence allows discontinuous terms to be synthesized by a common term that dissolves the discontinuity into a new unity. The melding of both these concepts provides the rhetorical underpinnings for a theory of how language can affect behavior and attitudes viewed from this perspective: sexist language causes sexism by acting as a discontinuous, terministic screen. The problems caused by sexist language can be transcended by a nonsexist language. Unfortunately, such a rhetorical analysis will remain only theoretical until there is a greater adoption of nonsexist terms as the accepted form of American English. (HOD)

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Sexist Language:

Terministic Screens and Transcendence

Colleen M. Keough
Graduate Assistant, Department of Communication
Purdue University
West Lafayette, IN 47907
(317) 494-3429

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In 1905, Danish linguist, Otto Jespersen, praised the English language for being, "Positively and expressly masculine. It is the language of a grown-up man and has very little childish or feminine about it."[1] Perhaps unwittingly, Jespersen s characterization of the English language identifies one fundamental rhetorical problem: Our language is sexist.

In recent years, sexist language has received increasing scrutiny from educators and feminists. For example, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) argues that sexist language, which is words or actions which arbitrarily assign roles to people based upon sex [2] or gender, makes people victims of sex role stereotypes. Various empirical studies report findings which support the NCTE position.[3] Furthermore, there also exists qualitative appeals arguing that sexist language harms male/female relationships by creating restrictive sex role characteristics.[4]

People opposing the use of sexist language urge the development of a nonsexist language. A nonsexist language would be comprised of androgynous terms which do not emphasize a masculine or feminine gender. It is belived that a nonsexist language will transcend sexual differences and promote individual qualities.

While quantitative and qualitative research has examined the consequences of sexist language, a more fundamental question has been virtually ignored by rhetorical critics: What is the inherent role of "language" per se in causing and promoting sex role stereotypes and sexist attitudes?" This perspective is fundamentally different from previous research because the question examines the underlying capabilities of language. Capabilities which exist regardless of the subject matter conveyed through language.

For this criticism, the most appropriate vehicle for examining the role of language in producing sex role stereotypes and sexism is Kenneth Burke's concept of the terministic screen.[5] In addition, Burke's theory of dialectics provides a framework in which to critique the argument that a nonsexist language can transcend sexual differences and promote individual characteristics.[6]

I

Language is a powerful influence in our lives. Through language we learn about ourselves and our environment. Anthropologist Edward Sapir posits that we actually interpret our experiences as we do because of the language habits of our community.[7] Sapir's colleague, Benjamin Lee Whorf, contends one can understand human thinking by studying language.[8] More recently, the NCTE linked language and social roles by saying, "Language plays a central role in socialization, for it teaches children the roles that are expected of them. Through language, children conceptualize their ideas and feelings about themselves and their world."[9]

The reason for language's influence over human thought is found in Burke's concept of the terministic screen. A terministic screen directs the attention of the audience along a certain line of thought.[10] Consequently, a terministic screen is a definition of reality. In describing this concept, Burke provides the example, "A textbook in physics turns the attention of the audience in a different direction from a textbook on law or psychology."[11] Similarly, on a Sunday morning, the language used by a minister will promote a different line of thought in an auditor than the language used by a Sunday afternoon sportscaster. Thus, all language guides human thinking to a certain end. Burke is very emphatic about classifying all language as terministic screens. "We must use terministic screens, since we can't say anything without the use of them."[12] (emphasis in original) More specifically, Burke acknowledges that sexist language does operate as a terministic screen and contributes to sexism. (Because of the relationship between sexist language and sexism Burke stated he is trying to avoid using sexist language.)[13]

Burke further explains that the manner in which a terministic screen operates to direct the attention of an audience involves three processes:

> Even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must also function as a deflection of reality.[14] (emphasis in original)

The implication of terministic screens is that once a linguistic terminology is accepted as reflecting reality, the term influences the selection and deflection of future observations. Consequently, the operation of terministic screens becomes a circular, self-perpetuating linguistic reality. To illustrate this point, the term "child" reflects reality in defining a type of human being. "Child" further selects characteristics such as immmaturity and naivety to be applied to this human. Thus, when a problem develops over a politically complex issue, the idea of consulting one who is called a child is deflected or disregarded because a child presumingly has no understanding of such matters.

Burke provides a corollary to his discussion of terministic screens by stating, "All terminologies must implicitly or explicitly embody choices between the principle of continuity and the principle of discontinuity." [15] Of particular importance to this criticism is the idea that continuous terms promote identification between the observer and what is observed; whereas, discontinuous terms promote separation. In other words, continuous terms "put things together," and discontinuous terms "take things apart." [16]

Admittedly in some situations discontinuity, or the lack of identification, is beneficial, i. e., when someone advocates a plan of mass destruction. But in other cases, i. e., sexist language, discontinuous terms should be avoided. Avoidance of discontinuity is possible if a new term can provide a different dimension in which to view the separation. This previous notion is explained in Burke's theory of dialectics.

The dialectical mode of language is used for understanding

how language works, and for making language work for a better life.[17] In an interpretation of Burke's theory of dialectics, Donald K. Enholm, posits:

> As a vocabulary, . . . Burke's rhetoric treats of idea and action with paired or polar terms, dialectic language whose ambiguity makes it capable of transformations, perhaps even to the highest level, with corresponding changes in the motives of those who use it.[18]

The paired or polar terms found in dialectics can be viewed as discontinuous terms which are separated by different interpretations of a situation. Burke's own discussion of dialectics explains how a critic looks at the polar terms in order to find a common, or "God term" that can bridge the differences in interpretation, thought, or opinion.[19] Transcendence is possible when the common term is more ambiguous, and moves the polar terms to a higher level of abstraction. This higher level of abstraction offers a new perspective in which to find commonalities between the terms in order to resolve the conflict or bridge the differences. That is, transcendence allows discontinuous terms to be synthesized by a common term which dissolves the discontinuous into a new unity. As Enholm notes:

> Thus, whenever there is conflict, be it within the self or between the self and others, this mode of resolution would bridge individual or social differences by transcendence to a more abstract term which, while it allowed for the uniqueness of each faction, still encompassed them in at least momentary unity.[20]

II

The belief that sexist language acts as a terministic screen is the underpinning for much of the rhetoric arguing that sexist language causes, promotes, and perpetuates sex role stereotypes. As Moulton, et. al., point out, "Linguistic form can be a cause of sexism as well as the reverse."[21]

In 1972, one of the first public presentations relating sexist language and sex role stereotypes was delivered by Wilma Scott Heide, then President of the National Organization of Women (NOW):

> We consider to be linguistically unjust phrases such as: 'Man and His World,' 'Man and His Works,' 'Man and His Laws.' While this reflects some reality of women's systematic exclusion, it further creates and perpetuates in the consciousness of every child the imbalanced participation and endeavors of only half the population.[22]

As Heide points out, nonsexist language proponents do not deny that sexist language once may have been a reflection of the subservient role women played. But even though the role of women in society is changing, the language is not reflecting this change. Consequently, we are using an antique language which does not account for, nor reflect, the evolution of new sex roles. Moreover, sexist language continues to select subservient roles of women as the role model for children. This means children grow-up assuming the subservient role is correct; thus, more modern and more equal sex roles are deflected.

An excellent example of how a term selects reality is the generic use of "he" and "man." The failure to identify both men and women in phrases using the generic "man" has been demonstrated empirically.

Miller and Swift report studies of college students and school children which found the generic use of "man" and "men" operates at a subliminal level and produces images which exclude females. Phrases such as "economic man" and "political man," and statements like "Man domesticated animals," tend to call up perceptions of only males, not groups of females, or groups of males and females.[23]

The subservient role of women is more subtly reflected and selected in the method of changing male terms to female terms. The female version of a male term is most often derived by adding a suffix, or the word: "girl," "lady," "woman," "women," and "female." To illustrate, the male terms of "poet," "author," "waiter," and "wrestler," become the female terms of "poetress," "authoress," "waitress," and "lady wrestler." This process demonstrates how males receive the primary focus and females are derivatives.

A couple of exceptions to the aforementioned process are found in the few "female" domains--marriage and sexual relations. Nilsen, provides the examples, "Prostitute is a female term, with male prostitute being the unusual . . . A women becomes a widow, the man, a widower. Women are more often given the title of divorcee, while a man is simply described as 'being divorced.'"[23] (emphasis in original)

As sexist language operates to select and reflect a narrow view of men's and women's characteristics, it further deflects the characteristics from being applicable to both sexes. Thus, the deflection process reveals how sexist language acts according to the "principle of discontinuity." That is, the terms which describe female characteristics are not identified with by males, and terms which characterize males are not identified by females; yet, females

are forced to identify with the generic male terms. In this manner the deflected, discontinuous terms perform as polar terms. H. Lee Gershuny, explains how personal characteristics, roles, careers, societal expectations, etc., are linguistically polarized as being "female" or "male":

> Rigid verbal stereotypes of masculinity and femininity . . . are used not only to describe people and language, but to judge and polarize the phenomenal world into superior/inferior and positive/negative. The inferior and negative poles tend to characterize the female stereotypes, the superior, and the positive, the male.[25] (emphasis added)

In as much as sexist language polarizes people, it is not an accurate reflection of the commonality between men and women. Heide posits, "To stereotype people by sex is to polarize people. Women and men are not so opposite as we have been taught (by sexist language.)[26] She further illustrates her point by discussing the terms of "masculine" and "feminine." Masculine and feminine are used exclusively to describe either males or females, respectively. Thus, masculine and feminine are discontinuous and polar terms for they do not allow the other sex to identify with the term. However, Heide stresses that for full human development, an individual needs both "feminine" and masculine" traits.[27] Similarly, Sandra L. Bem's Sex Role Inventory demonstrates quantitatively that people do have masculine, feminine, and androgynous traits.[28] But in the cases where people do reveal opposite sex characteristics, Heide maintains such cases have been deemed, "pathological and unhealthy."[29]

The lack of identification from polar sexist language affects children as well as adults. Former president of Mills College, Lynne T. White, elaborates on the psychological harm to children caused by the deflective nature of the generic "he" and "man":

> The grammar of English dictates that when a referrent is of indeterminate sex or both sexes: it shall be considered masculine. The penetration of this habit into the minds of little girls . . . is more profound than most people have recognized: it implies that personality is really a male attribute, and that women are human subspecies. . . . It would be a miracle is a girl-baby, learning to use the symbols of our tongue, could escape some wound to her self-respect; . . .[30]

Heide provides a concurring opinion, "Man and human are presumed to synonymous. Woman is thereby subsumed or considered deviant from human. . . . This results in cultural discontinuities of profound consequences for every child and adult whose unique human nature is incompatible with sex role stereotypes."[31]

To solve the problems of sexism and sex role stereotyping caused by sexist language, NOW calls for the use of a language which allows people, "to be considered human, a common existential reality that <u>transcends</u> our sex."[32] (emphasis added) Such a non-sexist language is an androgynous language that does not emphasize a masculine or feminine gender. Because no gender is emphasized, nonsexist language is more abstract, or ambiguous. This ambiguity then trascends the polarizations caused by the discontinuous sexist

terms and provides a new dimension from which to view reality.

Discourse from sociolinguist, Mary Ritchie Key, very clearly demonstrates the dialectical transcendence of sexist language by nonsexist language. Like other proponents of nonsexist language, Key maintains that sexist language divides people into poles: males versus females.[33] But Key also recognizes the path to transcendence is not without its uncertainty, "We will . . . wander between two worlds, belonging to neither one nor the other, but working toward that integrated whole which will be our premanent linguistic homeland."[34]

Once a nonsexist, or an androgynous, language is integrated into American English, Key maintains male/female relationships will strive for, "quality of life rather than power."[35] Women and men will find commonality based upon their individual characteristics; rather than characteristics they portray in order to fulfill societal expectations:

> An androgynous language will be complementary rather divisive. It will establish equilibrium in its unity. . . . It will combine the abstract with the concrete; feeling with logic; tenderness with strength; force with graciousness; . . . It will move away from the cruel distinctions that have wounded both male and female human beings.[36]

Efforts to make American English nonsexist include several linguistic changes. One successful linguistic change which was initiated approximately a decade ago was the creation of "Ms."

"Ms." represents a bridge of the dialectic terms of "Miss"--an unmarried female or a female child, and "Mrs."--a married female. Now an adult woman need not be degraded to the status of a child by the term "Miss" simply because she has chosen not be become a "Mrs." Despite initial criticism of the term "Ms.",[37] acceptance of the term has grown. Key reports the stylebook of the U. S. Government Printing Office now includes "Ms." in its list of acceptable titles.[38]

Currently, the selection of other nonsexist transcendent terms concentrates on finding alternatives to the generic use of "he" and "man" in pronouns and occupational titles, respectively. Additionally an alternative method of changing male terms to female terms is receiving increased attention.

There exist several possibilities of a transcendent term for the generic use of "he." One very simple transformation is to rephrase a sentence into the plural form and use "they." "They" is an acceptable referent to females and males because "they" does not suggest one sex in place of the other. However, "they" is not accepted as a singular pronoun. Therefore a singular pronoun, "tey", could be the transcendent term in singular sentences.[39] The term "tey" is like "they" in that no gender is explicit in form or implicit in reference. Thus, the term "tey" is ambiguous and capable of transcending both sexes.

Another suggestion of a transcendent term for the generic use of "he" is to use both pronouns, such as: "he and she", "(s)he", "s/he." These combinations very clearly include both females and males, which also allows for identification by either/both sex(es).

Similarly, sexist occupational terms can be made nonsexist through the creation of new terms. To illustrate this contention: "businessman--business executive," "fireman--fire fighter," policeman--police officier," and "mailman--mail carrier." All the aforementioned terms reflect a more abstract occupation in the second word because no sex is explicity stated.

One example of an occupational term which has proven that transcendence is possible through nonsexist terms is the term "teacher." "Teacher" is the transcended term of "schoolmaster" and "schoolmistress" or "schoolmarm." Moreover, "teacher" is the accepted title for a person involved in educational instruction. That is, the term "teacher" does not exclude either sex.

The alteration of male terms to make female terms--"waiter/waitress," "wrestler/lady wrestler,"--simply could be ceased. The former masculine version can be the transcendent term and be defined as a "person" who performs the task. That is, "waiter" would mean a person who waits on customers in an eating establishement; an author is a person who writes books; and a wrestler is a person who participates in the activity of wrestling.

Heide, suggests the term to transcend "masculine" and "feminine" is "human."[40] After all, the characteristics which comprise our personalities are basically human traits, (rather than plant or animal characteristics). In other words, only humans have emotions, speak in abstract, have the "negative,"[41] and reminiscence about the past. Therefore, characteristics representing these types of activities, i. e., loving, hating, dreaming, negating, remembering, should be broadly classified as "human," as opposed to exclusively

"masculine" or "feminine."

In as much as nonsexist language operates as a transcendent term to resolve conflicts and bridge differences between the sexes, it also operates as a terministic screen to direct the attention of the audience along a nonsexist line of thought. In other words, unlike sexist language which promotes discontinuity among observer and object, nonsexist language will stress cognitive continuity through personal identification of the observer and object. Nonsexist language will allow men to identify openly emotions and feelings without the distressing cognitve dissonance of violating societal norms. Likewise, women will be able to be assertive without feeling they have forfeited their femininity.

III

"Idealistic" is the best way to describe discourse promoting the use of nonsexist language. But in no way should idealistic be interpreted to mean the change to a nonsexist language is not possible, nor forthcoming. Efforts by publishers and editors[42] requiring publication materials to be presented in an androgynous language represents movement towards acceptance and support of nonsexist language.

However, the purpose of this criticism was not merely to mirror the developments of nonsexist language in various pieces of discourse. Rather, I offered a rhetorical explanation of how sexist language causes, and nonsexist language transcends, sexist attitudes and sex role stereotyping.

The melding of Burke's concepts of terministics screens and

dialectics provides the rhetorical underpinnings for how language can affect behavior and attitudes. This is why sexist language causes sexism and factions between women and men by acting as a discontinuous terministic screen. The problems caused by the linguistic power of sexist language can be made ambiguous and transcended to a new perspective of understanding by a nonsexist language. In addition, the dialectical notion that language works for the good of society mirrors the contentions that nonsexist terms can transcend sexism.

Unfortunately, a more thorough rhetorical analysis of how nonsexist language can achieve the aspirations of its proponents will remain in a theoretical realm until there is a greater adoption of nonsexist terms as the accepted form of American English. Without this widespread vernacular use of nonsexist terms, a critic must rely upon theoretical premises to explain the potential that nonsexist language has in changing behavior and attitudes.

Perhaps the adoption of nonsexist language could be hastened if widespread publicity is given to Coleridge's opinion. "The truth is, a great mind must be androgynous."[43]

Notes

[1]H. Lee Gershuny, "Sexism in Dictionaries and Texts," in Sexism and Language ed. National Council of Teachers of English (Urbana, Ill.: author, 1977), p. 143.

[2]National Council of Teachers of English, "Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language in NCTE Publications," in Sexism and Language ed. National Council of Teachers of English (Urbana, Ill.: author, 1977), p. 182.

[3]William R. Todd-Mancillas, "Masculine Generics-Sexist Language: A Review of the Literature and Implications for Speech Communication Professionals," Communication Quarterly, 29, No. 2 (1981), 107-115, reports on empirical studies investigating "gender-based perceptions," i. e. sex role stereotypes, as a result of sexist language.

A compilation of test instruments which may be modified to test more directly sexist language as a research variable can be found in: Carole A. Beere, Women and Women's Issues, A Handbook of Tests and Measures (San Fransico, Cal.: Jossey-Bass, Publishers, 1979).

[4]The National Council of Teachers of English in Sexism and Language has compiled guidelines for the nonsexist use of language, and an extensive bibliography of articles and books dealing with

qualitative aspects of sexist language. In addition, there are essays from several scholars each focusing on a specific area of sexist language: Alleen Pace Nilsen, "Linguistic Sexism as a Social Issue," "Sexism as Shown through the Engligh Vocabulary," "Sexism in the Language of Marriage," and "Sexism in Children's Books and Elementary Teaching Materials;" Haig Bosmajian, "Sexism in the Language of Legislatures and Courts;" H. Lee Gershuny, "Sexism in the Language of Literature," and "Sexism in Dictionaries and Texts: Omissions and Commissions;" and Julia P. Stanley, "Gender-Making in American English: Usage and Reference."

Another comprehensive bibliography of male/female linguistic behavior is reported by Mary Ritchie Key, Male/Female Language, (Metuchen, N. J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1975), pp. 167-190.

[5]Kenneth Burke, Language as Symbolic Action (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 44-55.

[6]Kenneth Burke, A Grammar of Motives (1945; rpt. Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 420-430.

[7]Edward Sapir, Language, Culture, and Personality, Essays in Memory of Edward Sapir (Menasha, Wis.: Sapir Memorial Publication Fund, 1941), p. 75-93, as quoted in Benjamin Lee Whorf, Language, Thought & Reality ed. John B. Caroll (Cambridge, Mass.: The M. I. T. Press, 1956), p. 134.

[8]Whorf, p. 66.

[9]NCTE, p. 182.

[10]Burke, Language, p. 46.

[11]Burke, Language, p. 45.

[12]Burke, Language, p. 50.

[13]Personal conversation with Kenneth Burke, 21 April 1982.

[14]Burke, Language, p. 45.

[15]Burke, Language, p. 50.

[16]Burke, Language, p. 49.

[17]Donald K. Enholm, "Rhetoric as an Instrument for Understanding and Improving Human Relations," Southern Speech Communication Journal 41 (1976), 223.

[18]Enholm, p. 229.

[19]Burke, Grammar, p. 429.

[20]Enholm, p. 431.

[21]Janice Moulton, George M. Robinson, and Cherin Elias, "Sex Bias in Language Use," American Psychologist 33, No. 11 (1978), 1033.

[22]Wilma Scott Heide, "Feminism: The Sine Qua Non for a Just Society," Vital Speeches, 38, No. 13, (1972), 403-409.

[23]Casey Miller and Kate Swift, The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing (New York: Lippincott and Crowell, Publishers, 1980), p. 7.

[24]Nilsen, "Sexism in the Language of Marriage," Sexism and Language, pp. 133-134.

[25]Gershuny, "Sexism in Dictionaires," Sexism and Language, p. 143.

[26]Heide, p. 408.

[27]Heide, p. 407.

[28]Sandra L. Bem, "Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI)," in Beere, p. 105.

[29]Heide, p. 407.

[30]Lynne T. White quoted in Bosmajian, "Sexism in the Language of Legislatures and Courts," Sexism and Language, p. 100.

[31]Heide, p. 403-404.

[32]Heide, p. 403.

[33]Key, p. 147.

[34]Key, p. 139.

[35]Key, p. 147.

[36]Key, p. 147.

[37]Stefan Kanfer, "Sispeak: A Ms-guided Attempt to Change Herstory," Time, 23 Oct. 1972, p. 79.

[38]Key, p. 139.

[39]Casey Miller and Kate Swift, "De-Sexing the English Language," Ms., Spring, 1972, p. 7.

[40]Heide, p. 407.

[41]Burke, Language, p. 9.

[42]American Psychological Association, Publication Manual, (1952; rpt. Washington, D. C.: author, 1981). NCTE, p. 182-191. The NCTE also includes a bibliography of publishers and recommendations for nonsexist style guides.

[43]Key, introduction.

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